

Lights Out,

By Lt. Jeff Hart

Most, if not all, carrier aviators have seen or heard a plane return with their external lights off, only to be told, “Check your lights,” by the LSOs. Soon thereafter, their external lights illuminate. What if both the aircrew and the LSOs make a mistake and don’t realize what’s happening?

I was on my second COMPTUEX, flying the F-14B. We were scheduled for a night target-acquisition hop north of Puerto Rico, with my nugget RIO and a nugget pilot on our wing. We detached our wingman as we approached marshal, using the radio and flashing our external lights. We then took a healthy cut-away and descended to our marshal altitude. The only problem was the exterior-lights master switch was left in the off position. It was a bright night,

and, because I had turned my mirrors face down at night, I didn’t notice the lack of exterior lights.

At push time, we heard over the radio, “99, MOVLAS recovery, MOVLAS recovery.”

That night, ICLS was down, and ACLS only was single-channel. As it turned out, the aircraft in front of and behind us got ACLS needles, but we didn’t. With the help of a new HUD, laser line-up, and a good self-contained CCA, we were on glide slope and lined up a little left at three-quarters mile. We called the ball, and paddles rogered our call, telling us, “You’re lined up a little right.”

Not realizing they simply didn’t see our aircraft, I figured the LSO just had called the wrong direction, so I made a lineup correction to



Baby

the right. As we approached centerline, paddles called, “You’re approaching centerline.”

We kept it coming on centerline, a little high, until we got waved off at the in-close position (inside one-quarter nautical mile). I waved off, thinking someone must have fouled the landing area. As we climbed, we got a call from our Tomcat rep, asking if we had a problem with our exterior lights. I looked back at the jet and, in awe, saw the lights were off. I checked the exterior-lights master switch and realized it was off. I turned on the lights and told the rep the switch had been off, but all external lights now were on. The next pass was an uneventful night landing.

Looking back at the night’s events, I knew there was only one main cause to the problem: switchology. I should have realized the exterior-lights master switch was off.

Making things even worse were three minor but, together, very important factors. First, the aircraft’s on-speed approach light was burned out. The approach light comes on independent of the exterior-lights master switch and would have been on if it had not burned out. This factor, combined with no position lights, meant the aircraft did not have a single light source.

Second, without an ACLS lock-on, the LSOs had no idea how far out we were until we were told by CATCC, “102, call the ball,” without a distance. If our aircraft had an ACLS lock-on, the aircraft’s distance would have been available at two different places on the platform.

Last, this recovery was one of the air wing’s first night MOVLAS recoveries since our cruise. As such, the team lead and CAG paddles, the two most senior LSOs on the platform, focused their attention on MOVLAS. When we called the ball, the controlling (CAG paddles) and backup LSOs confused the Tomcat pilot call-

ing the ball with another Tomcat at two miles. They began showing the MOVLAS-glide slope information and made lineup calls based on the other Tomcat’s position, not ours.

It’s not difficult to surmise if we had been low and paddles had shown a high-ball based on the Tomcat behind us, we would have made a power-off correction and would have flown toward the water—scary when you think about it.

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What prevented an unsafe approach were the LSOs on the platform who were not on a pickle. Our squadron LSO realized something was wrong, and, with the aircraft approaching the ship, he yelled, “Wave him off! Wave him off!” The controlling LSO quickly hit the waveoff lights, and, a few seconds later, a big, loud, unlit Tomcat flew over the flight deck at 20 feet. These guys have my utmost respect for what they did.

What did I take away from this? I’m going to question everything and double-check every item on a checklist—in the air and on the platform. I’ll try to keep the big picture, especially when I’m focused on a single task. Our air wing, especially all of our LSOs, learned lessons that night we will not forget. 🦅

Lt. Hart flies with VF-32.